

GAMING THE SCORE

WHEN FEEDBACK BECOMES FICTION

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CONTENTS

	Page
What is Survey Gaming?	3
Understanding Survey Gaming and its Underlying Mechanics	4
1. Score Solicitation (Priming, Coaching or Asking for Scores)	
2. Selective Surveying	
3. Incentivised Responses	
4. Falsified Responses	
5. Timing Manipulation	
6. Rigged Processes	
7. Biased Survey Design	
The Impact of Survey Gaming on Business and Trust	7
Distorted Decision-Making and Stalled Improvement Efforts	
Loss of Trust	
Strategies to Combat Survey Gaming	8
Actionable Steps for Organisations: Winning the Battle Against Survey Gaming	11

WHAT IS SURVEY GAMING?

Do you ever question how organisations really deliver exceptional customer experiences?

They often rely heavily on feedback tools such as Net Promoter Score® (NPS)*, Customer Satisfaction (CSAT), and Customer Effort Score (CES) to measure performance and guide improvement efforts. These metrics, when accurate and honestly collected, provide actionable insight into how well a business is meeting customer expectations. However, there's an increasingly prevalent threat that can undermine the integrity of these metrics: **survey gaming**.

Survey gaming refers to the manipulation or interference in customer feedback collection by employees or internal stakeholders to artificially inflate performance scores. This could be

anything from employee interference (e.g. asking for a 5-star rating), to a lack of rigour in how feedback is being collected (e.g. a smiley face machine in a restroom with no control over who pushes the buttons or how many times they are pushed).

A historical example illustrates this well. In India, the government launched a campaign to reduce the cobra population by offering a bounty for every dead cobra. Initially, the programme worked – but people soon began breeding cobras solely to kill them and collect the reward. Once the scheme was discovered, the government ended the bounty.

In response, breeders released their now-worthless cobras, leading to a larger population than before. This unintended consequence – now known as the Cobra Effect¹, demonstrates what happens when performance incentives are poorly designed – the system gets gamed and the problem worsens.

In the context of [customer experience measurement](#), the same dynamics can apply. Whether driven by incentive structures, performance pressure, or even a well-meaning desire to protect a team's reputation, survey gaming distorts reality, erodes trust in data, and undermines the very outcomes these programmes are meant to achieve. It leaves organisations "flying blind" and can lead to misdirected investment and failed experience improvements – ultimately doing more harm than good.

This article aims to shine a spotlight on the all-too-common issue of survey gaming – revealing how it affects businesses and customers. More importantly, it's a call to action: offering practical guidance and clear advice on how we can tackle this issue and [unlock the power of honest customer feedback](#).



UNDERSTANDING SURVEY GAMING AND ITS UNDERLYING MECHANICS

Survey gaming occurs when employees intentionally or unintentionally influence customer feedback in a way that produces biased or misleading results. It represents a disconnect or misalignment between the intent of CX measurement – gathering authentic customer sentiment – and the personal or organisational motivations of those designing the measurement programme or some of those being measured.

For example, a taxi driver might ask a rider to “give a five-star rating” before the customer has time to reflect on their experience. Similarly, an account manager might selectively request feedback only from long-time, satisfied clients while avoiding recent interactions that may have gone poorly. In each case, the authenticity of the feedback is compromised, and the resulting data no longer accurately reflects the customer’s true perspective.

The practice is often not malicious. In fact, many employees see it as harmless – or even justified – especially when customer experience scores are tied to bonuses, performance reviews, or job security. But regardless of intent, the consequences of survey gaming are significant and far-reaching.



When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.”

Goodhart’s Lawⁱⁱ

Survey gaming manifests in several distinct forms, each of which undermines the integrity of feedback data:

01

*Score Solicitation
(Priming, Coaching or
Asking for Scores)*

Employees directly ask customers for high scores or give them a heads up that a survey is coming. Most common in service industries like account management, hospitality, transport, and retail, it includes phrases like “Please rate me 10” or “I’ll get in trouble if it’s not a perfect score” which are used to elicit more favourable ratings. The effect of this can be exacerbated if the employee then watches over their shoulder while responding.

02

Selective Surveying

Employees or departments influence which customers are sent surveys, often omitting those they expect will give negative feedback. This can be done by manipulating CRM systems, delaying surveys, or directing only positive interactions toward measurement channels.

03

*Incentivised
Responses*

In some cases, employees offer customers discounts, free services, or perks in exchange for high scores. This practice effectively buys good feedback, negating the authenticity of the data.

04

Falsified Responses

At its most extreme, survey gaming can involve employees filling out surveys themselves or coaching customers to answer in a particular way. In digital environments, this may involve clicking through web surveys on behalf of the customer, in physical environments, this might be staff tapping the smiley face icon more often.



05

Timing Manipulation

Surveys may be triggered at moments most likely to result in favourable feedback – such as immediately after a positive transaction before something can go wrong or delaying or avoiding feedback after negative events.

06

Rigged Processes

Where they are aware of the survey approach, employees may intervene in the survey process to stop customers receiving a survey. For example, if they have an upset customer on the phone and know a survey is triggered at the end of the call, the employee may go out of their way to make the customer end the call – resulting in the customer not receiving a survey.

07

Biased Survey Design

Survey design can be influenced in ways that bias responses – for example, by omitting questions likely to elicit more negative feedback or by framing questions to encourage more favourable answers. A common illustration is the use of visual cues, such as colour-coding a 0-10 scale so that scores of 0-6 are highlighted in red (negative) while 9-10 are shown in green (positive) – subtly steering respondents towards higher ratings.



THE IMPACT OF SURVEY GAMING ON BUSINESS AND TRUST

While it may seem like a harmless or even logical way to “protect” one’s performance score, survey gaming has serious and systemic consequences:

Distorted Decision-Making and Stalled Improvement Efforts

Leaders rely on survey data to identify pain points, prioritise investments, and improve services. When this data is skewed, decisions are based on false signals. Problems go unaddressed, and resources may be misallocated.

Teams may also not feel the urgency to improve - creating complacency and stalling the cycle of continuous improvement.

Loss of Trust

Once survey gaming becomes widespread or publicly known, both employees and customers lose faith in the feedback system. Employees may see it as a game rather than a meaningful process, and customers may feel manipulated.

Employees who game the system may also be rewarded unfairly over those who collect honest—if less flattering—feedback. This discourages ethical behaviour and demoralises staff who do the right thing.

Ultimately, if the customer’s voice is not heard accurately, businesses are less likely to deliver experiences that meet real expectations, leading to frustration, churn, and reputational damage.

STRATEGIES TO COMBAT SURVEY GAMING

Successfully tackling survey gaming requires a multi-pronged approach that combines technology, culture, training, and structural changes to incentives and processes. Below are some of the most effective strategies:

Strategy 1:

Typically, we would recommend starting with a detailed Measurement and Programme Audit to better **understand data collection**. This will provide insight that enables:

- **Best practice survey design** ensuring the data collected will be unbiased and insights truly reflect the experience of customers.
- **Centralised survey distribution** using independent systems that automatically trigger surveys based on customer actions or moments in their ongoing relationship e.g. anniversary of joining, their birthday etc.
- **Randomised sampling** ensuring that surveys are sent to a random but statistically valid sample of customers, covering all touchpoints – not just favourable ones.

Strategy 2:

We also recommend the use of **analytics to identify flags that might indicate gaming behaviours**. Analytics can also be used to make metrics more robust

- **Analyse for anomalies**, detect patterns that may suggest gaming – then flag and investigate these outliers.
- **Incorporate multi-channel feedback** to validate survey data against other channels like social media, app store reviews or complaints.



Strategy 3:

How employees are engaged on CX and their role in promoting ethical CX measurement is critical to understand. Our recommended approach would be a dedicated change programme that includes:

- **Review and reform of incentive structures.** Incentive design is a deep and very complex topic, but a good place to start is to avoid linking bonuses or job security solely to NPS or CSAT. Incentive programmes should focus on a longer-term view of performance or a focus on outcomes not just outputs.
- **Educating employees on the value of honest feedback** and explaining why authentic feedback matters, how data is used, and the long-term consequences of gaming.
- **Enforced accountability for gaming** with clear policies that prohibit gaming and consequences that are enforced with effective sanctions – while remaining within the framework of what is ethically and legally permitted.

- **Leadership from the top** with executives championing the value of genuine customer truth over short-term scores. Leading by example, they demonstrate that negative feedback is just as important – if not more so – than positive feedback, and that customer insights are used to drive improvement rather than to assign blame or hand out rewards.



Leading by example, [top executives] demonstrate that **negative feedback is just as important – if not more so – than positive feedback, and that customer insights** are used to drive improvement rather than to assign blame or hand out rewards.”



Survey gaming is more than a nuisance; it's a systemic risk that erodes the integrity of customer experience programmes. While the motivations for gaming are often understandable – stemming from a desire to meet targets or avoid negative outcomes – the long-term consequences are destructive. Inaccurate data leads to poor decisions, dissatisfied customers, and disengaged employees.

The solution lies in creating programmes that utilise robust measurement techniques and engagement approaches that create cultures that value honest feedback over inflated scores.

ACTIONABLE STEPS FOR ORGANISATIONS:

Winning the battle against survey gaming

Here is a practical, actionable checklist of steps organisations can implement immediately:

1. Redesign employee incentives away from survey scores to success stories and good behaviours. Focus on the long-term success of positive CX behaviours.
2. Remove or address any employee-initiated survey distribution.
3. Educate employees on survey ethics and purpose.
4. Analyse for anomalies in survey data.
5. Establish and enforce anti-gaming policies.



CONTACT US

To learn more about how Ipsos can help you combat survey gaming and build trust in your measurement programmes email
CustomerExperience@Ipsos.com

Sources

- [i] Siebert, H. 2001. *The cobra effect: how to avoid the pitfalls of economic policy*. Deutsche verlagsanstalt
- [ii] Goodhart, Charles, *Problems of Monetary Management: the U.K. experience, Papers in monetary economics 1975 ; 1 ; 1. - [Sydney]. - 1975, p. 1-20*
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Further Reading/Listening

- [The Forces of Customer Experience: The science of strong relationships in challenging times](#)
- [The Experience Perspective](#) (our Ipsos podcast and LinkedIn Live series covering everything from Customer and Employee Experience to Channel Performance)

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